

**JOANNA ANTONIAK**

Nicolaus Copernicus University

antoniakjo@umk.pl

ORCID: 0000-0002-1011-7865

## **A guarantee of safety, a cautionary tale or a celebration? Popularity of true crime narratives through the lens of Mary Douglas's concepts of pollution and defilement**

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**ABSTRACT:** The fascination with crime, hastily described by some as a symptom of moral degradation of Western culture, seems to be a defence mechanism used by individuals to deal with social transgressions and anomalies represented by serious crimes. The aim of this article is to analyse the growing popularity of true crime through the lens of Mary Douglas's theory of purity and pollution, with a particular emphasis on the methods of dealing with anomalies appearing within conceptual schemata of a given culture. For this purpose, the text has been divided into four parts: the first part briefly presents the history of true crime; the second part analyses the idea of murder through the lens of Douglas's theory; the third part discusses the reasons behind the popularity of true crime narratives; and the fourth part showcases how individuals use true crime stories as tools to deal with anomalies.

**KEYWORDS:** true crime, Mary Douglas, pollution and defilement

In his book *When Killing Is a Crime* Tony Waters notes that murder, just like other crimes, is a social construction. It means that "acts are »constructed« as crimes only when there is a consensus that the acts are wrong and that the broader society has the right and responsibility to respond" (Waters, 2007, p. XIV). Furthermore, the society also decides which acts of killing must be punished

– and in what way – and which can be deemed as acceptable<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, societies decide to the extent to which homicide threatens the existing order while developing mechanisms the aim of which is protecting the social order

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1 This varying attitude towards homicide observed in societies is reflected in their legal systems. Murder is defined in the English criminal law as “the unlawful killing of a reasonable person in being under the King and Queen’s peace with malice aforethought expressed or implicit”; in other words, murder is the act of killing another person with the intention to cause either death or serious injury. A defendant can be acquitted of murder if they acted in self-defence or in case of the double effect, a situation in which death is caused unintentionally (for instance, causing death through administration of lethal drugs to a patient if the intention is solely to alleviate pain). Schedule 21 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 distinguishes five different types of tariffs (also known as imprisonment sentences). The first one, a whole life tariff (or life imprisonment) is used in the case of exceptionally serious offences or multiples offences committed together and considered as a whole committed by a person aged twenty-one or over, such as “the murder of two or more persons where each murder involves any of the following: a substantial degree of premeditation or planning, the abduction of the victim, or sexual or sadistic motivation; the murder of a child if involving the abduction of the child or sexual or sadistic motivation; the murder of police officer or prison officer in the course of his duty; the murder done for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause; or the murder by an offender previously convicted of murder” (Criminal Justice Act 2003, Schedule 21, Paragraph 4). A minimum 30-year tariff is used in the case of a particularly serious offences committed by a person aged eighteen or over, such as “the murder involving the use of firearm or explosive; the murder done for gain (in furtherance of robbery or burglary, done for payment or done in the expectation of gain as a result of the death; the murder intended to obstruct or interfere with the course of justice; the murder involving sexual or sadistic conduct; the murder of two or more people; the murder that is racially or religiously aggravated or aggravated by sexual orientation; or the murder normally resulting in a whole life tariff committed by a person aged eighteen or over but under twenty-one” (Criminal Justice Act 2003, Schedule 21, Paragraph 5). A minimum 25-year tariff is used in “a circumstance where a person aged eighteen or over takes a weapon to the scene intending to either commit any offence or have it available as a weapon and then used that weapon to commit the murder” (Criminal Justice Act 2003, Schedule 21, Paragraph 5a). A minimum 15-year tariff is used in the case of any other murder committed by a person aged eighteen or over (Criminal Justice Act 2003, Schedule 21, Paragraph 6) and a minimum 12-year tariff – in the case of any other murder committed by a minor (Criminal Justice Act 2003, Schedule 21, Paragraph 7). In contrast to murder, manslaughter is considered to be a less serious offence and, in the English criminal law, is divided into two types: voluntary or involuntary manslaughter. Voluntary manslaughter is the act of killing another human being with *mens rea* (an intention of cause death or grievous bodily harm), but severity of this act is reduced by the reason of a partial defence. Those partial defences include diminished responsibility. Coroners and Justice Act 2009, Schedule 52, Paragraph 1 states that “a person (“D”) who kills or is a party to the killing of another is not to be convicted of murder if D was suffering from an abnormality in mental functioning which (a) arose from a recognised mental condition, (b) substantially impaired D’s ability to do one or more following things (understand the nature of their conduct, form a rational judgment, and exercise self-control), and (c) provides an explanation for D’s acts and omissions in doing or being a party to the killing by loss of control”. Coroners and Justice Act 2009, Schedule 54, Paragraph 1 states that “a person (“D”) who kills or is a party to the killing of another, D is not to be convicted of murder if (a) D’s acts and omissions in doing or being a party to the killing resulted from D’s loss of self-control, (b) the loss of self-control had a qualifying trigger, and (c) a person of D’s sex and age, with a normal degree of tolerance and self-restraint and in the circumstances of D, might have reacted in the same or in a similar way to D”. In Schedule 55 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, qualifying trigger is understood as a fear of serious violence from victim against D or another identified person, a thing or things said or done which constituted circumstances of an

and discouraging individuals from undertaking actions which would disturb it. However, despite the existence of systems of discipline and punishment and the continuous condemnation of crime, murder – deemed to be the ultimate crime – still fascinates people as illustrated by the growing popularity of books, documentaries, and podcasts discussing true crime<sup>2</sup>. This fascination, often hastily described as a symptom of moral degradation of Western culture, seems to be a defence mechanism used by individuals to deal with social transgressions and anomalies represented by serious crimes. The aim of this article is to analyse the growing popularity of true crime through the lens of Mary Douglas’s theory of purity and pollution with a particular emphasis on the methods of dealing with anomalies appearing within conceptual schemata of a given culture.

Fascination with crime is a phenomena neither new nor characteristic for the twenty-first century. In the foreword to *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror* Dorothy L. Sayer notes that “death in particular seems to provide the minds of the Anglo-Saxon race with a greater fund of innocent amusement than any other single subject” (James, 2009, p. 11). P. D. James reaches similar conclusions, highlighting that “a vicarious enjoyment in »murder considered as a fine art«<sup>3</sup> [...] makes the whole world kin” (p. 11). According to James, this enjoyment contributes to the popularity of detective fiction, a literary genre which emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century in Victorian societies fascinated with crime and violence (p. 26). However, true crime is a much older phenomenon and its beginnings can be traced back to the second half of the sixteenth century.

According to Soraya Roberts, the birth of true crime was the result of “two relatively new developments: criminal justice and the printing press” (Roberts, 2019). Although accompanied by woodcut illustrations making them understandable for the illiterate, criminal reports printed at that era were targeted

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extremely grave character and caused D to have a justifiable sense of being seriously wronged, and suicide pact. Section 4(1) of the Homicide Act 1957 acquits of murder those people who had been involved in a suicide pact but failed to die; Section 4(3) of the same act defines a suicide pact as “a common agreement between two or more persons having for its object the death of all of them, whether or not each is to take his own life”. In turn, involuntary manslaughter occurs when the accused did not intend to cause death or serious injury but caused the death of another person either through recklessness, criminal (or gross) negligence, dangerous driving, or while committing an unlawful and dangerous act. In cases of both voluntary and involuntary manslaughter the decision concerning the sentencing is made by the judge who needs to take numerous circumstances into consideration before announcing the verdict. The summary of homicide in the English criminal law presented above illustrates arbitrariness with which societies approach the act of killing another human being, confirming Waters’s theory

- 2 Although the term “true crime” encompasses all real crimes – robberies, frauds, thefts, disappearances, and kidnappings – the majority of true crime media focuses on murders. Hence, when talking about fascination with true crime, I will be referring to fascination with murder.
- 3 James refers here to the 1827 essay by Thomas de Quincey entitled *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts* in which Quincey describes himself as a “connoisseur of murder” while reassuring his readers that he has not committed any himself.

at the upper classes whose members could afford them. The aforementioned criminal reports focused predominantly on in-family cases, involved multiple deaths and ended with a moral. As highlighted by Joy Wiltenburg (2004, p. 1384–1385), almost all publications of this type served as cautionary tales promoting Christian values:

The combination of truth with appeals to the heart underlined the religious focus of these works. Virtually all crime accounts published during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries connected their stories with an edifying Christian message. [...] Authors of crime reports explicitly advertised crime stories as relevant to all Christians because they gave warning of the consequences of sin. While the crimes recounted in print tended to be only the most horrific, authors could point to the slippery slopes that led from seemingly minor infractions to the worst of crimes. [...] Given the overlap of crime and punishment with the church's territory of sin, clerics felt a duty to explain the place of such events in the divine plan. In fact, the shock value of horrific crimes could be read not simply as a commercial opportunity, but as a sign that God was trying to get people's attention—just as he might with supernatural signs or monstrous births. God allowed such dreadful crimes [...] so that people in their horror would recognize the need for repentance and reform. [...] [T]he basic religious framework of sin and punishment underlay all crime narratives.

Despite their sensational tone and character<sup>4</sup>, those texts had numerous functions: they promoted the acceptance of punitive actions introduced by the governing bodies, helped strengthen Christian moral values and spread religious agendas, shaped proper emotional and social reactions to behaviours threatening the social order, and served as tools to rebuild it when necessary (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1397).

In her article, Wiltenburg underlines a surprising diversity of true crime literature. While the seventeenth century German pamphlets depicted predominantly victims and their suffering, their British counterparts focused on criminals – the so-called “last good-night ballads” were first-person narratives modelled after the speeches made by the convicts just before their executions (p. 1399). In turn, in the Puritan communities of North America the most popular were execution sermons<sup>5</sup>. With the dawn of Enlightenment, the popularity

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4 Wiltenburg highlights that authors of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century true crime publications included detailed and bloody descriptions of the committed murders, often providing the exact number and placement of wounds. This focus on the deformed body of a victim served not only informative purpose but also a religious one – it showed the brutality of a murderer acting under the influence of the Devil and compared the suffering of the victims to the suffering of Christ (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1391).

5 The sermons in question were given publicly and later printed and distributed after executions (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1403).

of true crime texts drastically decreased – heavily criticised for their insensitivity to the suffering of victims, exploitative character, and overemotional style, they were soon pushed to the margin<sup>6</sup>.

True crime literature returned to popularity during the Victorian era, when, thanks to the expansion of newspapers, crimes – especially murders – started to gain notoriety outside the communities in which they were committed, often reaching national – or even international – audience. This reawakened fascination with crime was illustrated by the public attention and press coverage received by Road Hill House murder in 1860<sup>7</sup>. After conducting the investigation, Inspector Jonathan Whicher arrested a sixteen-year-old Constance Kent for the murder of her three-year-old half-brother, Francis (Symons, 1992, p. 49). As noted by James, it was for the first time that “the horror of the deed, the age and innocence of the victim, the prosperous upper-class setting, the rumours of sexual scandal and the near certainty that the murderer was one of the household provoked the nationwide heady mixture of revulsion and fascination” (James, 2009, p. 26). The interest in sensational and bloody murders reached its peak in the 1880s, when in 1888 the crimes of Jack the Ripper both appalled and fascinated both British and international audience. Four years later the similar level of notoriety was reached by Lizzie Borden, who was accused of killing her father and step-mother with an axe.

The nineteenth century can be described as a milestone in the development of true crime literature. The first half of the century was marked by the emergence of first professional police forces<sup>8</sup> responsible not only for maintaining order, but also conducting criminal investigations; this period also witnessed a rapid development of criminalistics and such forensic techniques as ballistics or dactyloscopy (Burger, 2016). The evolution of the art of detection, combined with the Victorian fascination with violence and crime, became the foundation for the emergence of detective fiction<sup>9</sup>, represented by such authors as Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins or Arthur Conan Doyle (James, 2009, p. 26). According to Martin Kayman (2010, p. 48), early detective stories<sup>10</sup> can be described as:

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- 6 It does not mean that the publication of texts focusing on true crime ceased completely. In the 18th and early 19th century England numerous printshops specialised in publishing crime broadsides, texts containing engravings depicting the convict, crimes they had committed or their execution as well as detailed descriptions of crimes and the trail and the last words of the convict. Crime broadsides were sold during executions and, at the decline of their popularity, also in bigger cities of England and Wales.
  - 7 The events taking place at Road Hill House were described by Kate Summerscale in her 2008 book *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher or the Murder At Road Hill House*. The book became the basis for the 2011 TV series aired on ITV.
  - 8 The French Sûreté was established in 1812 and the London Metropolitan Police (commonly known as the Scotland Yard) – in 1827. The first professional police formations in the United States were established in Boston (in 1838) and New York (in 1845).
  - 9 Although nowadays described as crime fiction, it needs to be remembered that this particular genre of fiction began as detective fiction (now considered a subgenre of crime fiction).
  - 10 I discuss the classic detective stories and their modern counterparts – retro-style detective novel – in detail in my article *Retro-style detective fiction* (Antoniak, 2017).

[the] celebrat[ion of] the materialism of the age, showing that the ordinary small objects of everyday existence, if observed properly, have stories, create atmospheres, point directions [and], [a]t the same time, they celebrate the capacity of rationalism to organise the material of existence meaningfully, and the power of the rational individual to protect [the readers] from semiotic and moral chaos.

The crimes depicted in those stories lacked the sensational tone of pamphlets, ballads, and broadsides – the descriptions of crimes were as laconic as possible and focused on explaining the motivation of the criminal rather than their violent behaviour (Kayman, 2010, p. 48-49). On the other side of the spectrum were penny dreadfuls – serialised and illustrated stories inspired by Gothic novels, lives of highwaymen and true crimes aimed at working-class men. Penny dreadfuls were issued weekly, with each number spanning between eight and sixteen pages. As noted by Judith Flanders (2014), “the [dreadfuls] were astonishingly successful, creating a vast new readership. Between 1830 and 1850 there were up to 100 publishers of penny-fiction, as well as many magazines which now wholeheartedly embraced the genre”. By the end of the 19th century, penny dreadfuls were blamed for youth violence and suicide:

The prevalence of penny dreadfuls (as they were known in the press) and penny bloods (as they were known to shopkeepers and schoolboys) had by 1895 become a subject of great public concern. More than a million boys’ periodicals were being sold a week, most of them to working-class lads who had been taught to read in the state-funded schools set up over the previous two decades. [...] The new wave of literate children sought out cheap magazines as a diversion from the rote-learning and drill of the school curriculum, and then from the repetitive tasks of mechanised industry. Penny fiction was Britain’s first taste of mass-produced popular culture for the young, and – like movies, comics, video games and computer games in the century that followed – was held responsible for anything from petty theft to homicide (Summerscale, 2016).

At the beginning of the twentieth century the popularity of penny dreadfuls decreased significantly due to the combination of public outrage and growing competition (Summerscale, 2016). The rapid development of crime literature was mirrored by that of investigative journalism. According to Roberts (2019), it was the combination of those four elements – the creation of first police forces and the development of forensic science, crime literature, and investigative journalism – that shaped the public’s interest in true crime literature. William Roughhead is considered to be the father of the contemporary true crime literature; for sixty years – starting in 1889 – this Scottish lawyer published essays on the murder trials in which he participated (Weinman, 2018).

Roberts notes that another milestone in the development of true crime literature was the publication of Truman Capote's novel *In Cold Blood*<sup>11</sup> in 1965. The novel describes the murder of the Clutter family committed in Holcomb, Kansas. Capote's novel not only changed the way of writing about true crime, but also made this genre particularly profitable (Roberts, 2019). The popularity and position of true crime literature was solidified in 1980, when Norman Mailer won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Executioner's Song*, a novel based almost entirely on interviews with families and friends of both Gary Gilmore<sup>12</sup> and his victims. Throughout the twentieth century depictions of true crimes appeared predominantly in literature and documentaries. This changed with the dawn of the new century.

Both Roberts (2019) and Pamela Burger (2016) point to 2016 as the beginning of the Renaissance of true crime when documentaries and docudramas produced by Netflix – such as *Making a Murderer* and *The Keepers* – as well as podcasts – like *Serial* or *S-Town* – devoted to this topic gained popularity. This revival also led to a change in the perception of texts dealing with true crime – they are no longer perceived as a guilty pleasure or sensational entertainment for masses, but are enjoyed for their production value, drawing public attention to cold cases and focusing on investigators, victims and their families. Simultaneously, as noted by Emma Brockes (2016), some experts highlight that too dramatized retelling of true events not only instils in the audience unrealistic expectations concerning the working of police and justice system, but also can become a new source of trauma for victims and their families (Bradford, 2016).

As it has been mentioned in the introduction, crime – especially murder – is a social construct as it is the society itself that determines which behaviours threaten the social order and, therefore, should be condemned and punished. Hence, crime becomes, in the social context, an anomaly – or dirt – defined by Mary Douglas (2001, p. 36-37) as matter out of place:

Dirt [...] is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity.

In the context of crime, the aforementioned systematic order is embodied by both the moral code of a given community and its legal system. Therefore, crimes are labelled as anomalies not only by the members of the community,

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11 Both Capote and literary scholars describe *In Cold Blood* as an example of non-fiction novel, a genre which employs narrative techniques characteristic for fiction to describe true events.

12 In 1976 Gilmore murdered two men in two separate robberies. In September he was convicted and sentenced to death. His execution on 17 January 1977 was the first one since the death penalty was reinstated in the United States in 1976.



but, most importantly, also by those in power, who create and establish the said legal system; Michel Foucault calls this type of power disciplinary. According to Foucault (1982, p. 789), disciplinary power is a set of power relations which form the foundation of the society and constitute “a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions: it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable”. Apart from establishing laws – law, as highlighted by Foucault, is a way of exercising power popular in the Western societies (Foucault, 1998, p. 87) – disciplinary power compels individuals, encouraging them to take actions which do not violate those laws. As a result, disciplinary power not only influences the formation of knowledge in a given society, but also presents its members specific models of behaviour which, in turn, become the basis for the subjectification of an individual. As noted by Krzysztof Śledziński (2015),

subjectification has its roots in the strategy aiming at creating a sense of self; therefore, it uses individualised tendencies in order to make exercising control over an individual easier. This is achieved thanks to the disciplinary institutions: schools, hospitals, prisons, barracks, houses of correction. Although some of those institutions existed earlier, in the era of disciplinary power they started to be used to place individuals under the careful eye of those in power. Power disciplines an individual through placing them within a web of power relations aiming at ensuring their complete subordination<sup>13</sup>.

Therefore, when employed and implemented by disciplinary power, law has a normalising function – it becomes a tool used to shape a society<sup>14</sup> “in which punishment aims at normalising, forcing an individual to conform and adhere to norms imposed on them” (Śledziński, 2015)<sup>15</sup>. Foucault notes that such societies introduce punishments whose goal is not only to bodily punish the criminal, but also to compensate the victims for their suffering and to ensure that an individual would adhere to the rules and laws (Śledziński, 2015).

Breaking any laws is perceived as a disruption of the existing norms. Both the act itself as well as the individual who commits it are treated by the society as anomalies – they become dirt threatening the proper functioning of the whole community. As noted by Sigmund Freud (2004, p. 23), penal systems are based on the idea of taboo, understood as the essence of a forbidden act; hence, anyone who breaks the taboo – commits a crime – becomes the taboo themselves and threatens the integrity of the community, as through their

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13 Own translation.

14 Foucault calls such societies normalising ones

15 Own translation.



mere existence they encourage others to follow into their footsteps (Freud, 2004, p. 38). Therefore, the society needs to establish mechanisms which can be employed when dealing with those who make such transgressions.

Fascination with both crimes and criminals is not a new phenomenon; yet, the reasons behind it are much more intriguing and interesting. In their research on interest in true crime literature, Amanda Vicary and Chris Fraley (2010, p. 85) observe that women treat this type of stories as a dress rehearsal – as they are more likely to become rape or murder victims, women see true crime stories as a source of information about strategies and techniques which can be helpful if they find themselves in a similar situation; similarly, in their study on true crime podcasts, Kelli Boling found that “the online true crime podcast audience was predominantly female (73 percent) and the women were more likely than men to listen to podcasts for social interaction, escape and voyeurism” (Boling, 2019, p. 164). Catherine Tyler (2019, p. 28) reaches similar conclusions, highlighting that women more often empathise with victims, seeing them as avatars of themselves and their loved ones. In turn, Christine Tcharkhoutain notes that true crime stories provide the human brain with an opportunity to live through traumatic experiences in a safe environment and, through that, develop better and quicker reactions to such situations (Stinson, 2018).

The fact that women constitute the majority of the audience interacting with true crime media is particularly intriguing. In fact, true crime content creators – who are also mostly female – use their platforms to put emphasis on the women’s voices, to focus on “the female victims’ backstories and [to] criticise misogyny and sexism” (Greer, 2017, p. 154) dominating the depictions of brutal crimes in popular media. As pointed by Amanda Greer (2017, p. 154), online communities created by female fans of true crime media often serve as “online support groups [...] where they can discuss their anxieties regarding violence, trauma and sexual assault”. Furthermore, Greer notes that true crime podcasts – such as *My Favourite Murder* – change the way in which female bodies are perceived in depictions of crime, being it fictional or non-fictional:

while visual crime narrative only offers the female victim as a body, a corpse covered in clues, the narratives co-constructed by the hosts and listeners of *My Favourite Murder* imbued their evoked images – particularly those of the female victims’ bodies – with the spectral, the ghost violence past made present. In other words, through evocation, an ethical relationship between listener-consumer and victim is established, one that troubles traditional interactions with narratives of murderous, sexualised violence. This ethical relationship [...] offers attention and gestures towards a politics of care. If listeners begin to care about these stories, even if such care begins with an orientation towards titillating, sordid nature of such true crime narratives, perhaps they can begin to care for these stories and the bodies contained within – the persons contained within (Greer, 2017, p. 158-159).

Hence, true crime stories can be used not only to deal with the trauma caused by being faced with the possibility of becoming a victim of a particularly brutal crime, but also serve as a way to draw the attention to the marginalization of female bodies and voices in crime narratives both in fictional and non-fictional texts.

Another probable reason behind the growing fascination with true crime stories is the opportunity to explore motivations and psyche of a criminal. Through books, films and podcasts on true crime, the audience members are given at least partial insight into the minds of those who consciously break social rules (Cassibry, 2020). According to Kathryn Cassibry (2020), the bloodier and more terrific – and, in consequence, the more unfathomable for an average person – the crime is, the more fascinating it becomes. Simultaneously, true crime stories allow an individual to explore their own ‘dark side’ without breaking social norms or taboos (Greco, 2020). Cassibry also highlights that texts depicting real crimes are treated by many as a source of adrenaline – reading, listening or watching programs telling such stories causes adrenaline rush without participating in potentially dangerous activities (Cassibry, 2020).

As noted by Douglas (2001, p. 40), “[culture] cannot ignore the anomalies which its scheme produces, except at risk of forfeiting confidence”. That is why every community establishes the methods of dealing with them; Douglas distinguishes five such methods: reducing ambiguity caused by the appearance of anomaly; exercising physical control over the existence of anomaly; avoiding anomalous things; labelling anomalies as dangerous; and using ambiguous symbols in rituals (p. 40-41). Interestingly, fascination with true crime stories seems to function as the combination of all of the aforementioned ways of dealing with anomalies.

Using true crime stories as scripts preparing an individual to protect themselves and others from criminals can be seen as an act of labelling anomaly as dangerous and an attempt to avoid it – if members of the given community learn to recognize behaviours characteristic for an anomalous criminal, they will be able to protect themselves. At the same time, true crime narratives which place emphasis on female victims address another type of anomaly – that of a female body in the patriarchal society. Through highlighting the mistreatment of female bodies and voices in the depictions of this type of stories, the content creators and their audiences aim at reducing ambiguity caused by the appearance of abnormality.

Furthermore, employing such stories as a means of gaining an insight into the mind and motivations of criminals – especially murderers – appears to be both an attempt of exercising control over anomaly and a way of reducing its ambiguity through rationalizing. Similarly, the adrenaline-fuelled fascination with true crime stories can be seen as another attempt to reduce ambiguity caused by anomaly which, in consequence, becomes an unthreatening source of entertainment. Moreover, using true crime stories as a tool for exploring

one's dark side can be classified as a way of dealing with anomalies through implementing them in rituals – an individual uses the anomaly to purge and cleanse themselves of negative impulses which could otherwise push them to break existing social norms.

Finally, true crime narratives serve as a moral warning, functioning as contemporary fairy tales – they control anomalies through discouraging others from violating the rules. Solved cases support the existing social order, showcasing its triumph as the rule-breaker is caught and punished thanks to the effectiveness of the system. In turn, cases when an innocent person has been wrongly accused and sentenced instil fear in other members of a community and motivate them to even stricter adherence to the norms which are the only guarantee of safety (Greco, 2020); simultaneously, such cases point out the ineffectiveness of the system, often leading to its modification (Bruzzi, 2016). In fact, in their research on true crime podcasts and their impact on contemporary society, Kelli Boling (2019, p. 168) notes that “podcasts have already had an impact on the criminal justice system and podcasters are continuing to use the medium to shed light onto cases and inmates that need a voice”; furthermore, true crime podcasts have also a didactic function, often educating their audiences about the inner workings of the justice system which, in turn, may result in initiating reforms – the more public knows and understands about the criminal justice system, the more likely it is to propose changes. However, the most interesting category is unsolved cases: on the one hand, they show the failure of the system which proved to be unable to detect, catch and punish a criminal; on the other hand, though, they illustrate the depravity of those who violate and break taboos. In consequence, they become cautionary tales depicting how the destabilisation of social order results in the monstrualisation of an individual.

Although fascination with brutal murders and other crimes may appear disturbing to some, it is not a creation of postmodern era. What is more, showing interests in true crime stories is not only a part of human nature, but also a part of the process aiding individuals in dealing with events that disturb the social order. True crime stories are used to shield and protect oneself from anomalies as well as to control and label them. Furthermore, such stories are also employed by those in power to caution individuals against violating existing laws, rules, and norms. Yet, reliance on this fascination may bring some surprising – or even undesired – results such as encouraging the individuals who do not care about the existing social order to break rules for the sake of popularity and fame. Therefore, true crime stories become not only a cautionary tale about the negative consequences of such actions, but, in some cases, also a self-fulfilling prophecy.

An interesting aspect of true crime narratives created during late 2010s and early 2020s worth further exploration is the focus on female victims and the representation of their bodies in this type of stories. Through giving voice to

those who are often marginalised and forgotten, such creators not only draw their audiences' attention to sexism and misogyny pervading the depiction of female victims in media, but also manage to reduce ambiguity caused by the presence of female body in the discussion.

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